

by Diane Stanley

from  
*Clena*

War. No food. Lack of work.  
Sometimes events force people to leave  
the homes they love. For some of them,  
there is no turning back.

### Connect to Your Life

How important is your home and community to you? How might you feel if you were forced to leave it and go to a new land? Discuss your opinions with your classmates.

### Key to the Novel Excerpt

*Elena* is an example of **historical fiction**—fiction that is set in the past. This novel is based on the life of a real person and her family. You will read an excerpt, or a part, of the novel.

In telling the story, the writer changed some events and added details from her imagination. She also changed some of the names. For example Mamá's real name was María. In the story, she is called Elena.

This part of the novel is set in the early 1900s during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). Pancho Villa was a famous Mexican bandit who became a leader of the revolution.

### Vocabulary Preview

#### Words to Know

notorious	refugees
condolences	barrio
detain	



Reading Coach CD-ROM selection

from *Elena* 37

## FOCUS

What happens to the narrator's father after he leaves on a trip?

Time passes quickly when you are busy and happy. It is not human nature to stop and say, "I must remember this moment, for such a time may not come again." We take happiness for granted.

We think there will always be a tomorrow and it will be the same as today. Great changes take us by surprise.

### REREAD

How does this passage hint at what might happen in the story?

In the year 1910, when I was about five years old, my father had to go to Guadalajara on business. He went there once or twice a year. It was nothing unusual. As he mounted his horse, my mother went out to say good-bye. "Be careful," she told him. She was worried about who he might meet on the road. We had heard talk of a revolution. There were said to be rough soldiers and armed *campesinos* about. They were dangerous men. But Father just squeezed her hand and smiled. "I will be careful," he said.

*campesinos*  
(kâm' pĕ sé' nôs)  
peasants or farmers

Father was joined by several villagers who were making the trip with him. They waved to us and headed off across the rugged countryside, for there were no proper roads. It was just at the end of the rainy season and the path was wet. About an hour after they left, the ground under Father's horse suddenly gave way, creating a landslide. Down they plunged into the ravine below.

The villagers raced back for help, and many men hurried off with ropes to haul my father up to safety.

They brought him to our house and laid him on the bed. The doctor came and dressed my father's wounds. As he was leaving, we asked the doctor, "Will he

live?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Who can tell?" he said. "Perhaps Pablo knows. It is a gift some Indians have."

My mother stood and watched the doctor walk away from our house. "He is right," she thought to herself. "Pablo knows." So she went into the darkened room and knelt down beside the bed. She took his big hand and gently stroked it.

40 "Husband," she whispered, "how is it? Do you think you will recover?"

For a long time he did not look at her and he did not answer. At last he turned his head and spoke.

"No," he said. Then in a weak but steady voice he told her what he knew. He named the very day and hour in which he would die. He said there would be war and that she and the children must leave their home.

**REREAD**

What is unusual about Pablo's answer?

50 "You will always be in my heart," he said. He never spoke again.

Three days later, at the very hour he had spoken, my father died.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

What great change happens to the family? What other changes does Pablo predict?

**FOCUS**

Find out how the family reacts to Pablo's death.

Mother went crazy with grief. She ran weeping into the patio, and with a big stick began to swing wildly, knocking down her beautiful flowers. Then she opened all the cages and let the birds free.

After that, my mother grew quiet. Though she went on caring for us just as before, that *chispa*, the bright spark that was always a part of her, went out. Papá's  
60 absence filled our house with emptiness. I could not really understand what had happened, because I was so young. It seemed to me that Papá had just gone to where I couldn't see him—perhaps he was in the next room. I kept expecting him to walk in our door one day and make everything good again. But he never came, of course, and in time I understood that he never would.

I remember that it was warm and beautiful at that time, the skies a brilliant cloudless blue, day after day.  
70 It was as if nature were mocking us.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

What details tell you how deeply the narrator and her mother, Elena, miss Pablo?

**FOCUS**

Discover how Elena reacts when Pancho Villa and his soldiers take over the town.

One day I was playing upstairs with my brother Luis. I heard the loud clop-clop of horses on the stone pavement outside—not one, but many horses. So I ran to the window to see. Looking down, I saw our street transformed into a river of **sombreros**. The revolution had reached our little village—it was the army of Pancho Villa riding by!

With a gasp, Mother pulled me away from the window, for Pancho Villa was a  
80 notorious man. It was true that he was fighting to help free Mexico from the dictator Porfirio Díaz and that he wanted

**sombreros**  
(sôm brâr' ôz)  
large, wide-brimmed hats

**notorious**  
(nô tôr' ê əs)  
adj. well-known for bad deeds

to give back to the *campesinos* the land that had been stolen from them. He was, in fact, on his way to becoming a genuine folk hero, the Robin Hood of Mexico. But it was also well known that he had once been a bandit and that his men were just as bad as the government soldiers.

Neither army respected the law.

90 Wherever they went, they stole from the people, killed anyone who challenged them, and left burned villages in their wake. What would happen to us?

**REREAD**

How might you feel about Pancho Villa if you were the narrator?

Mother knelt down and gathered us in her arms. She understood in a flash that everything that had happened to her before had been for a reason. The books she had read, the hard numbers she had conquered, the battle she had won over her marriage—all this had made her strong. Now she had  
100 no father and no husband to help her. She had, instead, great courage and determination. Had there

not always been wars? And in every country and every age, brave men and women had faced terrible dangers. She could do it, too—God had put it into her heart. We saw this understanding pass across her face like a ripple of light. “Children,” she said urgently, “we must find Esteban.”

**REREAD**

Why has Elena’s strength become so important?

She knew that soldiers often took older boys and  
110 forced them into the army. My brother was sixteen.

None of us had seen him for hours. We searched the house for him, but he wasn’t there. A book lay open on his bed. He had put it down and gone off somewhere. Maybe he was out in the streets among all those men. Maybe they had already taken him. At last María found him—up on the roof watching the soldiers. Boys are so foolish sometimes!

We made a hiding place for him in a kitchen cabinet, behind the big clay pots. Then Mother had  
120 another thought—the horses. They were sure to steal the horses. But maybe if they found the stable empty, they would think the horses had already been seized. They would certainly not think to look for them in the kitchen, so she brought the horses in there, too.

Before my mother could hide anything else, there was a loud knock on the door. We could hear deep voices laughing and talking outside. Mother hesitated a moment, wondering what to do. Then she sent us into the back room. We did as we were told but opened the  
130 door a crack so we could see what happened. Mother took a deep breath and opened the door.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

What steps does Elena take in order to protect her family, especially Esteban?

## FOCUS

Read to find out who is at the door and what the person wants.

There stood four or five soldiers, rough men who smelled of sweat and horses. The man in front was stout and wore a huge drooping mustache. *Bandoleras* crossed his chest. We had seen his face before, on a government poster. It was Pancho Villa himself!

“Señora,” he said, “is this the house of Pablo, the famous maker of sombreros?” It was the last thing she expected to hear.

140 “It is,” she said, “I am his widow.”

“Then please accept my sincere condolences,” said the leader of the rebel army, bowing slightly. He paused for a moment and then added almost shyly, “And the hats? The fine hats? Are there no more left?”

### condolences

(kən dō' lən sīz)  
n. statement of sympathy and concern

My mother actually smiled. “Excuse me a minute,” she said. She went to a cupboard in her bedroom and

150 returned with one of  
Father’s beautiful silver-trimmed sombreros.

“This is the last one,”  
my mother said.

Pancho Villa was delighted. He put it on right away and actually paid her for it. Not only that, he posted a guard outside our house. As long as  
160 Villa’s army was there, we were not harmed.

## THINK IT THROUGH

What is surprising about Pancho Villa’s actions?



**FOCUS**

Find out why Elena and her family leave their village and what new problem she must solve.

"Pablo was surely watching over us this day," my mother told us later. "But it may not always be so. Before your father died, he told me there would be soldiers. He told me we must leave our home. I wonder how I could have forgotten it."

"You were sad, *Mamacita*," María said.

When the *Villistas* had gone, Mother went to the plaza and opened the shop to the people of the village. She emptied the store of everything, taking  
170 down great bolts of manta and giving them to people who had nothing. We took only our money, some clothes, and food for the journey. We were leaving behind our aunts and uncles, our little house, the furniture, the pictures, the pots and pans and dishes. We said  
goodbye to the friends of a lifetime.

**REREAD**

What sacrifices must the family make so they can leave?

Everyone urged us not to go. "It is not proper for a woman to travel unprotected like that," they said. "It is not safe."

180 "The world is changing around us," Mother answered. "We must change, too."

We left the village early in the morning. When we reached the train station, we found that it was packed with frantic, pushing people. It seemed as though everyone in Mexico was trying to get on that train. Mother and María managed to make it inside. Then before Esteban got on, he handed Luis and me in through the window, along with the basket of food.

We were lucky to have benches to sit on. Most of  
190 the people were in boxcars or crowded in the aisles.

For five days the train chugged north. Through the open windows came soot, dust, and flies. I had worn a beautiful lacy white dress for the trip. Soon it was damp with sweat and covered with dirt.

When we reached Ciudad Juárez, we faced a new problem. What were we to do with Esteban? He was tall, almost a man. The soldiers at the border crossing would not treat him as a child. They might

200 detain him for days, together with the rough men from the train. They might take him for the army.

**detain**

(dǐ tǎn')

v. stop from leaving

"I think the answer will come to me," Mother told us. "We must be patient."

So we waited while she thought, but it was not a good place to be. The town was rough and

lawless. With thousands of refugees pouring in, desperate to flee homes that were no longer safe, thieves and

210 pickpockets roamed the streets. Hotels and shops charged ridiculous prices that people had to pay, because they had no other choice but to starve or sleep in the streets. For days we ate nothing but fruit.

**refugees**

(rěf' yōō jēz')

n. people who flee a country to find protection from war or political oppression

Mother befriended a Chinese fruit seller who was honest and kind. One day she told him our problem. He smiled, for he knew exactly how to help us. Every day he crossed the border with his fruit wagon. We could dress Esteban in the man's clothes and straw hat. He would pretend to be  
220 the fruit seller's helper.

That afternoon we went over the bridge to El Paso together, Mother and the three of us walking along next to the fruit wagon. The cost was one penny each. At last we were safely in the United States.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

What problems does the family face? How do they solve their problems?

**FOCUS**

Elena decides to move her family to California. Read to find out what their life is like there.

We headed for California because we had a cousin, Trinidad, who lived there. We didn't have his address,  
230 though. In fact, we didn't even know what town he lived in. So we went to San Francisco, which was famous. We made our way to the barrio, where many people from Mexico lived. We asked everyone we met there, "Do you know our cousin Trinidad?" No one did. And besides, we didn't like it there. It was damp and cold. In Los Angeles, no one had heard of Trinidad, either. We were happier there, because the

**barrio**

(bă' rē ô')

*n.* mainly Spanish-speaking neighborhood in a U.S. city

240 weather was warmer. But the city was too big, not like our lovely little village in Mexico. We heard about a place called Santa Ana. There were lemon and orange and walnut groves there and good schools for the children. So that is where we went and that is where we stayed. We never did find Trinidad.

By then, we had spent most of our money. So Esteban got a job picking fruit. Sometimes he was gone for weeks, living in the camps near the farms. When he came home he was sore and tired. He didn't laugh and  
250 play with me the way he had before.

Mother ran a boardinghouse, which was hard work. She did the cleaning, made the beds, mopped the floors, and scrubbed the bathtub. She washed and ironed the boarders' clothes. After all that, she went into the kitchen and cooked mountains of rice and beans and tortillas and enchiladas for them to eat. We all sat down to dinner together at a long pine table. Sometimes the boarders were very nice and became  
260 our friends. Some even came from the same part of Mexico as our family had. It made me feel like I wasn't so far from home.

**boarding-house**  
private house where meals and rooms can be rented

María and I did what we could. We hung the laundry out on the clothesline, and we brought it back in if it rained. We helped wash the dishes and changed all the sheets once a week. And we looked after little Luis.

But Mother said that our real job was to get an education. School and  
270 homework always came first. When we were done with that, she said, we could help. I felt bad sometimes, sitting in a chair with a book in my lap while Mother was never still, always

**REREAD**

Why is education so important to Elena?

bustling about at her chores. She did it with a good spirit, though. If I said to her, “You work too hard, *Mamacita*,” she would just shake her head and smile.

“And what is so bad about work?” she would say. “Work is how I take care of my family. Work is how I keep busy. Work is how I am useful. It is not so bad.”

**REREAD**

What do you learn about the way Elena views herself and the world?

**THINK IT THROUGH**

Compare Elena’s life in the United States to her life in Mexico. Which do you think she prefers?

**FOCUS**

Read to see how the children and their mother adjust to life in California.

At school we learned to speak English and heard all about George Washington crossing the Delaware and Thomas Jefferson writing the Declaration of Independence. We wrote essays on the American Revolution and the American Civil War, and one day it dawned on me that Americans had suffered in terrible wars just as we had. And not long after that, I realized that Americans weren’t “they” anymore. After all, we wore American clothes, read American books, knew American songs, and ate American candy. We had all become *real* Americans—all of us, that is, but Mamá.

She never quite knew what she was. Part of her was still back in Mexico and part of her was with us in California. Sometimes in the evening, after the dishes were done, we all went out on the porch to sit and enjoy the cool night air. At

**REREAD**

Do you think that Elena’s feelings are common among people who come to the United States from other lands?

those times, Mother liked to  
300 talk about the old days. She  
told us about growing up in  
her father's great house in the  
beautiful mountains of  
Mexico. She talked of her  
gentle sisters who sang so  
beautifully to the guitar. She  
remembered her own little house full of flowers and  
birds. But she especially loved to talk about Father—  
how they fell in love first and got to know each other  
310 later, how he was such an artist, making beautiful  
sombreros, and how he knew things it was impossible  
to know, yet he knew them just the same. I had been  
so small when Father died, I could scarcely remember  
him. Those stories gave him back to me.

In all those years she talked only of happy times. It  
was much later that we learned what had happened in  
our little village. Only when we were grown—strong  
and full of hope—did we find out that it was gone,  
burned to the ground by the soldiers. And when we  
320 heard about the people who had died, people we had  
known, then we understood what our mother had done.  
With her courage and daring, she had saved us all.

#### THINK IT THROUGH

1. What words would you use to describe the narrator's mother? Support your answer with evidence from the story.
2. How does the narrator judge her mother? Do you agree with her judgment? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Elena would return home if she could? Give details to support your opinion.